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INTERZOO 2018—IS NO NEWS GOOD NEWS?

by Ole Pedersen, Denmark

Photos by the Author

Is it fair to expect that the industry is able to present 5-10 new aquarium plants at Interzoo every second year? And is it fair to expect that the aquarium industry is as innovative as the mobile phone industry? Probably not, but nevertheless, I came to Interzoo with high expectation and was slightly disappointed with the fact that no one had discovered the 'blue Anubias' and decided to flash it at the world's largest aquarium fair that is held every second year in Nuremberg, Germany. Fortunately, the show tanks were stunning and more and more companies are now showing their products using planted tanks that are 'scaped months prior to the fair. Therefore it is a real pleasure to wander around and chat with producers of

tanks, filters and pumps, chillers and heaters and light fixtures as well as aquarium plant nurseries and fish breeders. In the present article, I am inviting you inside the exciting world of aquarium plants based on the insider information that I obtained during nine days of exciting consultancy for Tropica Aquarium Plants and Interzoo 2018.

THE DISPLAY TANKS AT INTERZOO 2018

Tropica is renowned for their planted tanks and there is constant flow of visitors who stop by the stand just to enjoy the stunning planted aquaria. This year, the stand was designed to highlight the three categories of aquarium plants that was introduced years ago to make it easy for customers to select the

right plants for their tanks – and also for the shopkeepers to provide useful advice for their customers. Three big 250 L tanks marked the stand next to the 'Easy', 'Medium' and 'Advanced' pillars. The tanks had been 'scaped by George Farmer and Jurijs Jutjajevs back in Tropica's showroom in Denmark and then maintained by Jurijs and Tropica's staff for 3 months before being transported 1000 km south to Nuremberg.

We all showed up Sunday morning at 6 AM at Tropica and then we started preparing the tanks for the long and demanding transport. Anja and I were in charge of the

big tanks so we started draining them because the tanks are transported without water in order to protect the hardscape during transport. Sudden stops on the freeway would result in a complete disaster if the tanks were full of water as pieces of rocks and substrate would slide from side-to-side. Fortunately, the tanks are grown out without fish so we did not have to catch any fish before draining the tanks. Shrimps and snails are added at the time of 'scaping to control algal growth but both shrimps and snails can be transported sitting in the moist foreground plants; in this way, there is plenty of oxygen for them

▼ *This little gem is 'scaped by Volker Jochum of Dennerle. The tank also took part in the Magdeburg contest in early April and for unknown reasons, it is now sitting on top of my dining table. I have promised to try and maintain the tank, follow it over time and write an article for TAG later this year.*



during the demanding transport. Once we had removed the water, a thin layer of plastic wrap was to cover the plants so as to reduce desiccation and bubble wrap was used to support the fragile stem plants. Finally, the tanks were placed on a pallet and secured at each corner before being placed in the back of a cargo truck, set for destination Nuremberg!

It sounds like we had engaged with a random shipping company but in fact the truck belonged to IHM Müller or, in fact, Casco as these companies have now merged. The German tank builders are known for high-end tanks and deliver

shop solutions as well as custom-built end user aquaria. The 250 L tanks were built using OptiWhite glass in front and sides, and when brand new few tanks look as good as these. The OptiWhite glass is extremely transparent (no green glare at all) and you can actually read a newspaper placed underneath the tank if you look from above and down through the front glass, which was 10 mm-thick on these tanks. But no roses without thorns! OptiWhite glass is very soft – not as soft as Plexiglass but close. I am the lucky owner of several IHM Müller tanks with OptiWhite glass but although I am extremely careful and have

▼ *The flow tank was probably the main attraction at Tropica's stand, and the photo only shows a minor section of the tank that was 2.7 m long. Two high-output pumps from Panta Rhei delivered a powerful flow throughout the entire length of the tank so that both plants and fish were displayed in a way that mimicked a true fast-flowing brook. Use the QR code to access the YouTube interview with Chris Lukhaup embedded in George Farmer's Interzoo report from Tropica's stand.*





^ The 'Advanced' category 'scaped by George Farmer and Jurijs Jutjajevs three months prior to the Interzoo 2018 event back in Tropica's showroom in Denmark. *Hemianthus callitrichoides* 'Cuba' forms a bright green carpet showing excellent contrast to the dark island with two reddish plants (*Hygrophila* 'Araguaia' and *Nymphaea lotus*). In the back, the bright green *Hygrophila costata* towers and requires frequent trimming to prevent taking over the entire 'scape.

^ The 'Medium' category was 'scaped by George Farmer and Jurijs Jutjajevs in Tropica's showroom in Denmark. Juris visited Tropica once a month up until the show to carry out major trimming. Minor trimming and maintenance were done by Tropica's staff. Especially *Rotala rotundifolia* and *Limnophila hippuridoides* developed bright red colors during the show; compare with the photos that were taken back in Denmark before the tanks were transported to Southern Germany (see <https://tropica.com/en/inspiration/layout/Layout109/21227>).



never used a metal scraper when cleaning the glass, the front is full of scratches since carbonate minerals caught in the sponge are hard enough to scratch the glass...

Thirty-six hours later the tanks arrived at the fair and we worked hard to get water back into the tanks. We are using normal tap water whilst some other companies transport water in pallet tanks to make sure that they can control the water chemistry. It may sound a bit unprofessional, but we have never tested the tap water in Nuremberg – we simply started using it 10 years ago and with very good results. The thing is that when

we use tap water, it is so much easier to make frequent water changes, and this is exactly what we do. We meet in every morning at 6 am and then we have three hours before the show opens to carry out a 100% water change on all the tanks. We use the cold tap and this time of the year, the tap water is around 12 °C but since the hard 'scape is up around 24 °C, the resulting water temperature is around 16-18 °C after the water change. And the plants just love it! See for yourself how some species develop wonderful red colors in a matter of days; one of the photos show the full effect and there is

▼ *The 'Easy' category was also 'scaped by George Farmer and Juris Jutjajevs. Like in the past, the 'Easy' category is my personal favorite. I find it exciting that the plants can thrive at such low CO₂ (Tropica recommend 5 mg/L) and yet look like this. The dense carpet is formed by Marsilea hirsuta along with the other undemanding plants such as e.g., Cryptocoryne beckettii 'Petchii' and Microsorium pteropus 'Narrow' form a stable environment that requires very little maintenance except, of course, a 30% water change and minor trimming once a week.*



a link to Tropica's website where you can see how the plants looked prior to daily morning chills back in Denmark. Obviously, we need to make sure that fish, shrimp and other invertebrates are happy with this treatment (and this is why you will never see a nice blue Discus in a Tropica show tank during the Interzoo show).

FUSION OF AQUATIC PLANT NURSERIES IN EUROPE

The biggest news in the industry is probably that Tropica and Dennerle merged earlier in 2018. Dennerle is a German company that also produces tanks and aquarium accessories similar to e.g., Eheim and Fluval and it is only the plant division that has now merged with Tropica. The new consortium will so far continue to market plants under both brands but in reality, aquarium plants will be produced in both Germany and Denmark. Shops and end users will not know if the Tropica plant they are purchasing was produced in the Danish or German facilities. Tropica is already producing plants in Canada, Singapore and China, although the latter is for domestic use only in China.

As a consultant, I do not have access to the books so I am not aware of the actual market share of the new consortium. Nevertheless, it was obvious that some of the other European producers felt uneasy about the super-nurseries. But how about the end users; should

we also worry about the merging of Tropica and Dennerle? Only time will tell whether this is going to result in higher prices if the competition is severely reduced. For the time being, I am confident that the new company will result in more choice since traditional Dennerle and Tropica customers now will have access to many more different plant species and varieties. The new research and development team also consists of some of the best people in Europe, and they will have more muscles to work on new products.

▼ A close-up of the 'Easy' category showing an extremely dense carpet of *Marsilea hirsuta*. The growth of *M. hirsuta* was perfect this time; some readers may remember previous reports from Interzoo where we had huge challenges with fungus in *M. hirsuta* and had to remove it from the 'scape prior to the show in Germany.



✓ *Like in previous years, the red plants flourished after the long and demanding transport from Tropica in Denmark to Interzoo in Nuremberg in the Southern Germany. This example shows a close-up of Limnophila hippuridoides. We are convinced that the daily 100% water changes with cold tap water (lowering the water temperature to 15-18 °C) triggers the formation of anthocyanins (the red pigment). Many aquatic plants also turn red during wintertime due to the low water temperature where photosynthesis still occurs but starch and protein syntheses are stressed by the low temperature, and then the excess sugars from photosynthesis are funneled into production of anthocyanins.*



CONCEPTUALIZED DISPLAY OF PRODUCTS AND USER INFORMATION

So, what was Interzoo all about this year? As I already revealed, I did not really see any new plants on display. The competition is fierce within the industry and I guess that most companies cannot afford to hold back new products in order to launch them on a trade show where end users are not represented. Instead, products are released in a constant flow whenever the marketing people are asking for news.

The fact that Interzoo is open for wholesalers and retailers only is probably also reflected in the fact that so much emphasis is on how to present and sell plants in the pet shops. Obviously, the concept differs between big chain shops such as Pet World and Pets at Home and the smaller specialist shops that often focus 100% on aquaria. The bigger chains want a shop-in-shop solutions or other solutions that minimize handling of plants. This is why tissue culture cups have also entered into this segment of aquarium shops since the cups can be stored at low light outside a tank for many weeks and still look attractive to the end user. Only five years ago, tissue culture cups were for specialists and internet shops. The challenge is that customers in these chain shops often want something that is ready to use and they may not be willing to wait 2-3 months before

the 3-5 cups they purchased have turned into a beautiful planted aquarium.

I am in science so I am not the right person to ask if there was any groundbreaking news in terms of handling, presenting or selling plants, maybe with one exception. I noticed that Aquatic Plant Centre of Thailand has launched a new micro-cup, which they use to sell species of *Bucephalandra* (see photo). In my 2016 report from Interzoo, I was worried that *Bucephalandra* would be a threatened genus in the near future. Back then, only a few species were available as tissue culture and most plants sold worldwide were collected in the wild in Borneo. Now, most aquarium plant nurseries produce *Bucephalandra* in tissue culture but the cost is high since it is notoriously slow-growing, not only in the tank but also during production. This makes expensive for the end user. With the introduction of the micro-cup, APC is able to sell a cup at a fraction of the price and this makes *Bucephalandra* accessible to hobbyists who may not be prepared to pay 10-20 US \$ for a normal cup.

CONCLUSION

So is no news really good news? First of all, Interzoo in fact presented lots of new ideas and concepts but seen from a plant nerd's perspective it was not

worth the visit. Nevertheless, it was exciting to be part of the Tropica team where the ambitions are sky high and failure is not an option. The show tanks must peak exactly at the time where the fair takes place and during those four days, they have to look like a million dollars every morning when the crowd enters Hall 1 where the Tropica stand has been located for the past 25 years. 🌿

▼ *The nurseries are working hard on producing Bucephalandra in tissue culture. The challenge is the inherent slow growth of Bucephalandra, which is also the reason why collection of wild specimens makes Bucephalandra particularly vulnerable in its natural habitat. APC's micro-cup (to the left) as the small portion makes it affordable to a larger group of customers.*

